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ABSTRACT

Ways in which culture in general and cultural change in particular affect approaches to and attitudes toward learning are examined, drawing on both published evidence and personal experience to support the position that changes in underlying technological and economic conditions create differing cultural behaviors, customs, values, beliefs, mythologies, and psychologies. Examples are offered to demonstrate how these changes are reflected in culturally distinct approaches to learning. Major cross-cultural parameters such as collectivism vs. individualism, power distance, availability and control of resources (including learning resources), and socio-historical context for learning within the community are discussed. Specific suggestions are made for teachers, instructional materials developers, and others wishing to address these issues in classroom language learning materials. It is suggested that such materials might be particularly useful in instruction for intercultural communication, international issues, English for academic purposes, and English-as-a-Second-Language reading and writing instruction. Contains 36 references. (Author/MSE)

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Ethnographies of Learning

TESOL '97

Orlando, Florida

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David A. Hough

Ethnographies of Learning

Abstract

This paper examines how culture in general, and cultural change in particular, effect approaches and attitudes toward learning. Both published and experiential evidence are reviewed which support the position that changes in underlying technological and economic conditions create differing cultural behaviors, customs, values, beliefs, mythologies and psychologies. Case examples are offered to demonstrate how these changes are reflected in culturally distinct approaches toward learning. Such major cross-cultural parameters as collectivism versus individualism, power distance, availability and control of resources (including learning resources), and sociohistorical contexts for learning within the community are also discussed. The article ends with specific guidelines for teachers, materials writers and others who wish to address these issues in the development of classroom language learning materials. It is suggested that such materials may be particularly useful in intercultural communication, global issues, EAP, reading and writing courses.

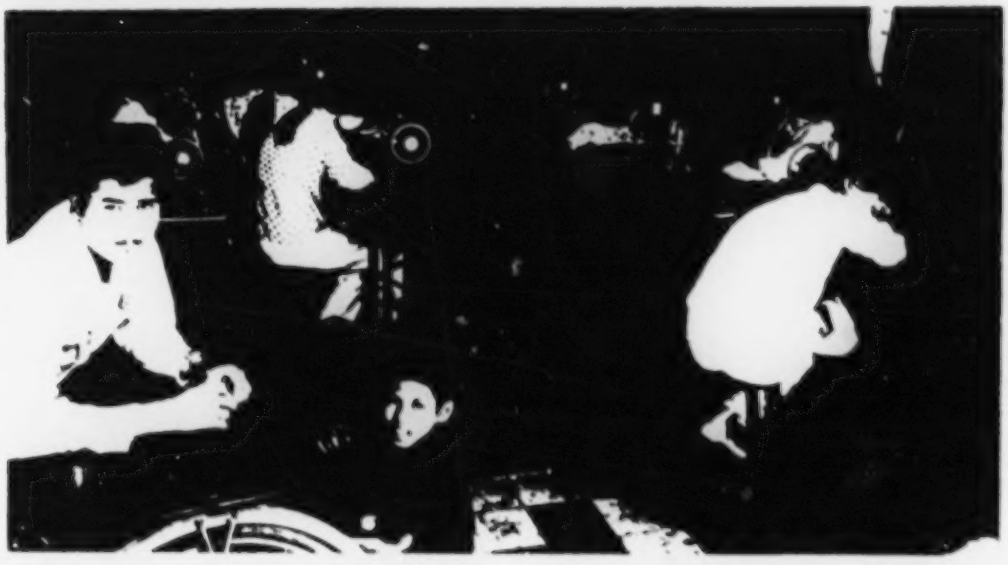
A Challenge

Let's begin with a problem. You've been asked to teach a business English course in typing. You walk into class on day one and find 45 eager students crowded onto benches facing the lectern. In the back of the class there are ten or twelve more students standing. Next to the lectern is the teacher's desk. On it there is one, very old, very dusty, manual typewriter. What do you do?

In order to allow some time for thought and reflection, let me briefly describe some other experiences before returning to what I observed two years ago in Vietnam.

Some Early Observations

My first time in Vietnam was from 1967-68 as a US Navy photo journalist. During that year I wrote a lot of stories — not just about the war but also about Vietnam and the Vietnamese people. One such story was about a sewing school in DaNang. In fact, I still have one of the pictures I shot — one of the ones that didn't get printed. This must have been either late 1967 or early 1968.



A sewing school in DaNang, Vietnam, circa 1968.

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Since the war ended, and since reunification, I've been back to Vietnam three times — twice to do work with the Hue University of Pedagogy and the Ministry of Education in helping to design distance education materials, and once — my first time back — to visit the country again and get an idea of what kinds of education and training needs there might be. It was on this first trip back in 1993 that I was walking down a side street in the central part of DaNang, when quite by accident I stumbled onto the old sewing school. It was still there and still open for business, although there were two noticeable differences.

First, there didn't seem to be as many sewing machines. The machines that were there looked like the same ones I'd photographed 25 years earlier, but there weren't as many of them. The other difference was that along with the population of DaNang, the student population at this school had greatly increased. So much so that there were at least three or four students for every machine. I wondered if — and if so, how — these changes had affected the dynamics of what went on in the classroom.

I stood outside and looked in. I noticed some playful giggling at one of the tables. At another table there was a helpful hand reaching from the back of the group to guide a piece of cloth. I turned to a third table. Two students were working the foot pedal together. Next to them, three students were standing over their machine. While it was difficult for me to see exactly what was going on, they appeared either to be threading the machine or possibly trying to fix a jam. Finally, I looked at a table toward the back of the room — the last one I could observe clearly. Three students were intently watching a fourth operate the machine. One girl had her neck stretched over the shoulder of the student in front of her so she could see.

Unfortunately I didn't have my camera with me this time, and since I was on my way with a friend to meet someone, I couldn't stay longer than the minute or so I did. However, as I walked away I began thinking about how much peer teaching I had witnessed in that brief interval of time — and all of it, I presume, without the aid of graduate courses in learning theory!

This and some other experiences like them sparked my curiosity about the relationship of learning tools and resources to the development of different types of learning and teaching styles. It also marked the beginning of my interest in using ethnographic data in writing classroom learning materials. I started looking for articles on the subject in journals and anthologies on intercultural communication, anthropology and Vygotskian approaches to culture and learning.

In the Canadian Arctic

One article I found early on was by Jean Briggs (1988), who as a young anthropologist in the early 60s, spent approximately eighteen months living as an adopted Inuit daughter in the Canadian Arctic. Briggs wanted to learn the Eskimo language along with household and community skills appropriate to her adoptive role. These skills included learning how to scrape caribou in preparation for winter clothing, and mend and sew skin boots. The sewing process first required stretching the skins when they shrank from drying, and then sewing very small stitches with very strong jaws so as to prevent the possibility of moisture getting into the boots.

The resources necessary to learn these skills were severely limited. Caribou herds had diminished in 1958, initially resulting in famine. Although the Inuit had been able to shift to greater dependence on fishing as a source of protein, they still needed caribou skins for making boots and clothing. But with limited resources, there was little if any room for mistakes. For those learning to stretch and sew, this meant lengthy periods of observation, followed by limited trial. If it appeared that a learner were about to make a mistake, the most qualified adult would immediately intervene and continue the job. Among the Inuit children, this intervention was accompanied by laughter and joking, which was then followed by intense observation. For Briggs, however, it was an interruption of the learning process and cause for great frustration.

I see this frustration stemming from a clash between trial-and-error and observational learning styles. For someone coming from a middle class American background where learning

is not tied directly to production, and where resources are generally not as limited, learning by trial-and-error may seem natural. However equally natural is observational learning in situations where resources are severely limited or accuracy is paramount.

A Pharmacy in Thailand

This brings me to another story. On a recent trip to Bangkok, I misplaced my glaucoma medicine. Since it's sold over the counter in Thailand, I simply went to a local pharmacy. While waiting I noticed a clerk behind the counter who was counting and bottling pills. She had a young girl — possibly her daughter — sitting next to her. Actually, it's not all that uncommon in Thailand to see working women bring their children to the job site.

Anyway, this clerk had a hand-held metal plate somewhat reminiscent of a small pin board game with grooves which could sort up to 50 tablets. At one end was a small funnel-like device for dispensing the pills into a bottle without any spillage or the need to touch them.

She would first pour some pills from a large bottle onto the plate and then spread them out with a tongue depressor so they would line up in five rows of ten each. If she had too many she'd pour the extras back and line the remaining pills up again to double check the number before dispensing them into a small container. She repeated the process at least four or five times while I was there and every time she talked her way through each step.

I was particularly interested in what she was saying, and whether she was talking to herself or to the girl. Now except for some survival Thai like "yes," "please," "thank you," the only words I know are the numbers. So I knew she was counting from one to fifty. In fact, I was tempted to count along with her just for practice. *Neung, sorng, sahm, see, hah, hok...*

But instead, I asked the person with me to translate. He said she was giving directions. That confused me because the young girl was just watching — granted she was watching very intently, but she wasn't really doing anything that required directing. So I asked just how explicit these directions were. "Oh, she's teaching," he said. "She says 'You open bottle, shake slowly, put out pills, don't spill, take stick, don't touch...' like that." I wondered why, if

the girl were really being taught, she wasn't practicing as well. "Maybe next time," smiled my friend. "This way, no mistakes."

A Montessori Program

In contrast I was reminded of my son's Montessori school which I had visited shortly before taking this trip. There, practice combined with open-ended questions which encourage discovery and critical thinking are much more common. I recalled watching a child working with a wooden puzzle map. The teacher, rather than saying, "Put the blue piece here," or "The blue piece goes next to the yellow one," simply asked, "Where are some other places you think it might go?"

As a side note I might add that when peers are working together — and I have seen this in my own classes as well as in Montessori — there is a greater tendency for students to be product-oriented and give explicit directions. And providing that the learning environment is not too competitive, I think there is also a greater tendency for students to really try to help each other.

Street Vendors in Vietnam

Again, a story about Vietnam. On that first trip back I was with a British friend who is a fellow teacher and extremely good with children. He also happens to smoke so every day he'd buy a pack of cigarettes from one of the young street vendors we saw regularly. On this particular day, eight or nine of them saw us coming and race-walked toward us with the biggest, fastest steps they could take, their arms swinging playfully in exaggerated fashion — all the while calling Steve's name.

Upon reaching us the competition started in earnest. Should he buy from the first person to reach him? Of course. But yesterday, he'd promised another girl — the youngest one. Then too there was the girl who reminded us that we hadn't bought anything from her yet. It took about five minutes of artful negotiation to sort out, but finally I bought a pack of gum

from the girl who hadn't sold us anything and Steve bought his cigarettes from the girl he'd promised.

The last stage in the transaction involved the exchange of money and here all competition came to an abrupt end. The youngest girl had a cigar box — Cuban, of course — with her money in it. And the same youngsters who only moments earlier had been fiercely competing with her for Steve's business were now being extremely protective, crowding around her and giving explicit instructions on how to make change. A similar scene, minus the cigar box, followed with the chewing gum vendor.

Limited Resources

Based on the examples I have given thus far, I believe that where: (1) learning resources are limited, (2) the need for accuracy is great, or (3) the learning tasks are directly related to production, the following kinds of learning and teaching relationships are likely to develop:

1. Emphasis on group needs, cooperation and protection of group members.
2. Guidance by teachers or peers which prioritizes explicit directions.
3. Extended observation which may include watching, listening or, in some cases, feeling.
4. Practice based on copying and rote memory with emphasis on accuracy.
5. Intervention by qualified adult or peer for the purpose of fixing, helping.
6. Emotional support in the form of play, laughter, joking.

Ample Resources

On the other hand, I believe that where: (1) learning resources are not as limited, (2) the need for accuracy is less critical, or (3) the learning tasks are less closely tied to production, a different set of learning and teaching relationships may develop:

1. Emphasis on individualized learning needs and personal achievement.
2. Open-ended questions which encourage discovery and critical thinking.

3. Observational behavior which requires students to take responsibility for their own learning.
4. Ample practice; mistakes seen as part of the learning process.
5. Minimal intervention; correction from peers or based on student initiative.
6. Independent social behavior; freedom to choose/change learning tasks and affiliations.

Individualism versus Collectivism

Beatrice Oloko (1994, p. 198) of the University of Nigeria notes that complex division of labor, rapid urbanization and industrialization in her country has resulted in a serious clash of learning styles. She states that unlike the traditional values which I described earlier, modern societies value self-orientation, universalism, achievement, affective neutrality, and specificity. This suggests that the clash may in large part be one of collectivist versus individualistic learning and teaching relationships.

The following description of individualistic and collectivist traits (Triandis, 1994), implies that many of the pedagogical assumptions held by the Western teaching profession (Kachru, 1996) are based on individualistic relationships, where:

1. the views, needs and goals of the self are most important (viz. individual learning needs), whereas the collectivist emphasizes the views, needs, and goals of some collective;
2. behavior can be explained by the pleasure principle and the computation of personal profits and losses (viz. individual achievement, relaxed, fulfilling and meaningful learning), whereas the collectivist stresses that behavior is a function of norms and duties imposed by the collective;
3. beliefs distinguish the individual from the in-group, allowing he individual to be an autonomous entity (viz. critical thinking, individual responses), whereas the collectivist pattern emphasizes shared beliefs, that is, what the individual and the collective have in common;

4. social behavior is independent of and emotionally detached from the collective (viz. frequent changes in group membership), whereas in the collectivist pattern, it is dependent, emotionally attached, and involved with the collective. Furthermore, social behavior in collectivist cultures is cooperative and even self-sacrificing toward the in-group members, but indifferent, even hostile, toward out-group members.

Power Distance

The clash of learning styles described by Oloko may also involve how resources are controlled and supplied. Back in the late 70's, after tiring of Japanese conversation schools, I decided to practice what I'd been preaching as a language teacher and learn how to *do* something in a foreign language rather than simply studying the language for its own sake. Since my hobby was cooking, I enrolled in a Japanese cooking course which met every Saturday for one year. It was great. I was the only foreigner and nobody else spoke English!

After three months of learning to sharpen knives, we graduated to cutting vegetables. Since the knives we had to buy ourselves, and since the vegetables were in ready supply, there was ample time for practice — although it was more of the rote variety than real trial-and-error. About midway through the course, though, we moved to fish and it was here that the question of supply came into the picture. With one fish per table of about six students each, I spent much more time observing than practicing. And while I smiled and tried to observe as best I could, it *was* frustrating and the frustration definitely reduced my ability to concentrate and learn.

Similarly, not long ago I interviewed a Japanese returnee who had gone through elementary school in the US, and was finding it difficult to adjust to school in Japan. As a seventh grade member of her school tennis club, for example, she was only allowed to retrieve balls. Serving and volleying were taught in eighth grade, games were played in ninth.

These last two examples may have more to do with what is called *power distance* than *individualism and collectivism*. That is, they are more concerned with *control* of learning

tools and resources than actual availability. I'm sure, for example, that the cooking school could have afforded to purchase more fish, just as the junior high school could have found a more egalitarian way to share tennis court space.

Here I would suggest that the availability *and* control of resources are sociohistorically tied to the development of class and hierarchies of power — and as such are inexorably linked to what, from a Vygotskian perspective, can be termed "learning as a dimension of social practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1996, p. 47).

Some Examples from Micronesia

This brings me to the island of Kosrae, the easternmost state in the Federated States of Micronesia. With a population of just under 8,000, the Kosraeans have embarked on a community-based program of alternative development to combine traditional skills and learning strategies with core K-12 academic subjects.

In 1995 I visited the island and with the help of Alister Tolenoa, the curriculum supervisor of the State Department of Education, spent a lot of time learning about learning on Kosrae. I also met with US Peace Corps and Japanese (JOCV) volunteers.

Rich in vegetation as a source of food and building materials, and with fish in abundant supply, Kosraeans have traditionally been self-sufficient. Likewise, learning has been largely based on trial-and-error practice, collective labor and sharing. In weaving baskets, for example, learners and skilled adults work together on their own baskets. If mistakes are made, they simply take more pandanus leaves and start over.

This same approach to learning can be found in the classroom, although it was here that the clash of learning styles described by Oloko became evident. One JOCVer who was teaching Japanese in the high school expressed frustration at what she considered to be the cavalier attitude of her students about making mistakes. Rather than carefully erasing them, she complained, they simply threw their papers away and started again.

The US Peace Corps volunteers had a different learning problem. It involved communal sharing and was the cause of some ill feelings among the Kosraeans. Although these American volunteers appreciated the idea of collective labor, community learning and sharing — and even volunteered to help paint a school building — they were unable to generalize this knowledge to their office refrigerator. On the door was a sign warning visitors not to take food which didn't belong to them.

Frustrations, Mistaken Attributions and "Dumbing Out"

Placed in a cross-cultural or multicultural learning environment, such clashes are likely to result in frustration and mistaken attributions on the part of both teachers and students. There is also the danger of students being "dumbed out" of the education process altogether.

In recalling her learning experiences among the Inuit, for example, Briggs notes, "I did my best to learn with the children when they were taught to turn annoyance into amusement, but laughter did not come easily." (ibid., pp. 27-28) Here, I am inclined to think that the turning of "annoyance into amusement" is more a mistaken attribution on Briggs part than a description of how the Inuit children actually felt.

For those of us like Briggs, individual learning by trial-and-error may seem both more comfortable and efficacious. For those accustomed to observational learning with stress on memorization and accuracy, however, trial-and error learning may involve greater risk since it exposes the learner to the possibility of making mistakes and being ridiculed (Hough, 1994).

Furthermore, it would be ethnocentric of us to assume that learning relationships which do not fit neatly into a Western pedagogical framework are inherently alienating, outmoded, inefficient or that they fail to meet the cultural expectations and needs of our students. They may, in fact, be far more culturally adaptive than we realize (particularly if our method of cross-cultural analysis lacks a clear understanding of the underlying economic, technological and sociohistorical structures which produce these relationships).

Here, I'm reminded of a Japanese university student who after returning from a year of study in the US asked rather pointedly, "Why do American teachers think we Japanese hate our education system? Most of us have fond memories of our school days."

Discussion

This brings me to how we as teachers and materials writers can address these issues:

1. Become more aware of issues of ethnography:

Phillipson (1992), suggests researching such areas as race, class, gender, ethnicity, sociopolitical movements and strategies for alternative development. To this I would add that we should further explore how economic and technological change produces change in learning and teaching.

2. Incorporate ethnographic material into the curricula:

Tollefson (1991) states that most ELT materials are based on individualistic Anglo-American patterns of cultural and linguistic behavior. One way to address this problem is to write lessons and activities which are derived from the research Phillipson suggests. Such materials would be particularly useful in intercultural communication, global issues, EAP, reading and writing texts.

3. Use the student community as a resource:

Classrooms are shut off from the everyday activity of the real world. In general all we can do is simulate. Moll and Greenberg (1990) have turned to the working-class community of their Mexican students in Tucson as a resource for instructional innovation in the teaching of literacy. As in Kosrae, informal networks of family, friends and neighbors provide economic assistance by sharing labor, skills and information. This is a rich source of real-life learning among both adults and children. For the materials writer, working to develop materials together with students in the community can be an extremely rewarding and profitable activity.

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4. Teach students to be their own ethnographers:

Ethnographic research doesn't have to involve going far away. Donan (1997) describes a class of junior college women in Japan who studied Japanese and foreign eating habits at a local MacDonald's in Osaka. Here materials writers might help by designing workbooks on how to actually do ethnographic fieldwork. Such text could include guidelines on preplanning, getting in and getting help, the actual observation, and follow-up (p. 101), as well as sample case studies.

A Challenge Revisited

This brings me back to the typing class at the business college in Vietnam. On the day I observed, all but about the last five minutes were taken up with lecturing on the workings, repair and maintenance of manual typewriters. In fact, I was later told that typewriter maintenance is a more valuable skill than typing — especially typing for speed — because of the high cost of replacing equipment compared to the low cost of skilled labor. During the last five minutes, however, the students all raised their hands and practiced choral repetition of the keyboard letters and a few words as they "punched them out" in the air.

The approach chosen by the typing teacher may not be the only possible one. Others might find new and more innovative solutions. Nevertheless, it was clearly grounded in the economic and technological needs of his learning community. For us as teachers and materials writers, I believe that such an understanding can lead to empowerment.

In closing, I would like to paraphrase Abraham Maslow who once said something to the effect that if the only tool a teacher has is a hammer, he tends to treat everything like a nail. I hope this paper may at least be worth a pair of pliers.

#

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Anthropological Quarterly

Anthropology and Education Quarterly

Cultural Anthropology

Culture and Psychology

Current Anthropology

Ethnology

International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education

Journal of Applied Anthropology

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography

Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology

Journal of Cross-Cultural Research

Mind, Culture and Activity

Nature, Society and Thought

Practice

Theory and Psychology

Theory of Social Behavior